

Written Testimony of Representative Brian Higgins (NY-26)
Make It in America: What's Next?
PANEL 2: Skills Training for the Future

I thank the chair, and I thank Mr. Hoyer for calling this important hearing today.

Over the last five years our country has slowly recovered from the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. At long last, American families are beginning to feel a return to normalcy.

Since Congress stepped in to help General Motors and Chrysler through bankruptcy in 2009, the auto industry has added 600,000 jobs, including the creation and retention of 700 jobs at the GM engine plant in Tonawanda, NY. And the larger economy has added private-sector jobs for 63 months in a row, the longest streak on record. Over the past five years we've added 12.6 million jobs, nearly 900,000 of which have been in the manufacturing sector. We are seeing the largest resurgence in domestic manufacturing in decades, as rising costs overseas encourage U.S. companies to move factory production back home.

Although the economy is in far better shape than it was in 2009, we still have a long way to go. There are steps the government can and should take to promote job growth, especially in the manufacturing sector. I'd like to respectfully offer my thoughts on how the "Make it in America" agenda, under the leadership of Mr. Hoyer and House Democrats, can expand our economy.

And I'd like to draw on the experience of Buffalo and Western New York. For decades we suffered from a weak and vulnerable economy. But today you see construction cranes in downtown Buffalo again. Jobs are being created and Buffalo is regaining the confidence it once had.

The most obvious lesson of Buffalo's resurgence is the transformative power of infrastructure investment.

Ten years ago my community won a \$279 million federal relicensing settlement from the New York Power Authority. We dedicated that funding to infrastructure, and it is currently financing the transformation of Buffalo's waterfront from an unused mess to a magnet for hundreds of millions of dollars of private investment.

Our example of the economic power of infrastructure could not be clearer. But Washington is not paying attention.

Congress has authorized just \$50 billion a year for our roads and transit. And despite the common misconception, only 8% -- or \$64 billion -- of the 2009 economic stimulus bill went to infrastructure. Yet we've spent over \$150 billion rebuilding infrastructure in Iraq and Afghanistan -- and for what? It is time we do some nation building here at home.

Salaries in the construction trades average \$70,000 a year, and the jobs can't be outsourced. I suggest the Make It in America agenda should encourage Congress to enact a much more robust infrastructure bill this year than the timid approach currently under consideration.

A second lesson we've learned in Western New York is that investments in the environment and energy can lead to the creation of manufacturing jobs.

Along the Buffalo River is the Republic Steel plant. It was one of the largest employers in the region until it closed in 1984. The site sat abandoned for decades. But in recent years our community cleaned up the site using the Brownfields program. We converted it into the Riverbend Commerce Park -- 200 acres of mixed use economic and recreation land on the Buffalo waterfront dedicated serving as a “green business hub”.

Last year SolarCity, America’s largest solar energy supplier, decided to locate its advanced solar manufacturing plant at Riverbend. The factory, which is under construction, will be the largest solar panel manufacturing plant in the Western Hemisphere and will produce 1 gigawatt of annual solar capacity. It will create 3,500 new jobs in Western New York between the plant and local suppliers.

What had been a depressing reminder of former glory now inspires confidence. Buffalo’s old and industrial image has been transformed to one that is new, exciting and welcoming economic development. But without federal policies that recognize the benefits of alternative energy, the skyrocketing use of solar energy will be limited. And unless we support environmental cleanup programs, fewer communities will be able to transform their abandoned factories into new manufacturing hubs. Therefore I suggest that the Make It in America agenda educate Congress about the opportunity we have to make America a manufacturing hub for the energy technologies of the future.

A third component of the Make It in America agenda should be job training. Employment in the domestic solar industry will grow by 20% this year. In Western New York, Erie Community College (ECC) has seized the opportunity to develop a clean energy curriculum program to meet growing employment needs. Students at ECC learn how to size and install solar energy systems, connect electricity to the grid, and interpret and comply with the local building codes.

Just as manufacturing businesses compete with companies on every continent, their employees compete with workers all over the world. In this new global environment it is essential that American workers develop the skills to keep them ahead of the competition. And because technologies change and industries adapt, our workers need sustained continuing education over the course of their careers to keep their edge.

One area in particular we should examine is the education afforded to our veterans. The GI bill provides the opportunity for veterans to obtain college, technical or vocational education. But there are deadlines by which they must use these benefits, limitations that do not reflect the realities of our modern economy. After leaving the service, many veterans postpone further education to join the workforce and support their families, or are faced with lengthy rehabilitations from service-related injuries.

GI bill benefits should not come with an expiration date. We should instead provide our veterans greater flexibility in accessing their earned educational benefits. America’s military personnel have placed their lives on the line for our freedom and we must ensure that our nation’s veterans receive the benefits they earned serving our nation. I have introduced legislation, the Veterans Education Flexibility Act, that will allow our veterans to get the education and job training they have earned, at a pace that makes sense for a 21st Century workforce.

Infrastructure, alternative energy, and job training. By taking chances in these areas Western New York is on the right track once again. It is my hope that the Make It in America agenda will help Congress reverse course and embrace smart investments in these areas that are catalysts for job creation in American manufacturing.